

Citation for published version:

Tantua, B, Devine, J & Maconachie, R 2018, 'Oil governance in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Exploring the role of the militias', *Extractive Industries and Society*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 302-307. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2018.03.013>

DOI:

[10.1016/j.exis.2018.03.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2018.03.013)

Publication date:

2018

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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Oil governance in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Exploring the role of the militias

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Abstract

This article explores the complex voices of militants associated with the capture of oil resources in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The persistent violent conflict surrounding the struggle over oil resources is a major concern for many within the country and the international community. Understanding the conflict over oil in the Niger Delta has triggered a wide range of discussions and debates among researchers, politicians and policy makers. However, these debates have overlooked the views of the militants themselves, who are actively engaged in the conflict over resource governance in the region. Drawing on new empirical data, this article builds upon insights from the New Social Movements literature to explore the experience and expectations of militants, and to then reflect on the significance of these for understanding the politics of oil governance in the Niger Delta. We argue that militia actions that appear to challenge the legitimacy and authority of the Nigerian state to control oil resources, are embedded in complex webs of formal and informal interactions involving political elites, militia leaders and primary citizens. This, we argue, offers a fresh and innovative perspective into the dynamics of militancy in the governance of oil resources in the Niger Delta.

1. Introduction

A number of social movement organisations have emerged in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria over the last decade. These movements, often positioned in opposition to state power and authority, have mostly been unsuccessful in claiming rights or changing the structure of oil governance in the country. Despite the actions of these movements, the State maintains a tight grip over the management and distribution of oil resources. As a result, the benefits from exploiting the resources are also carefully managed. This is significant, given the value of the oil and natural gas extracted from the region. While oil and gas extractions have helped multinational corporations and contributed significantly to Nigeria's foreign exchange revenues, local inhabitants of the Niger Delta have, on the whole, not experienced significant benefits. Furthermore, the process of extraction has had a profound negative environmental impact, with increasing evidence of water pollution, the destruction of fishing activities and the depletion of livelihood options. Local communities have been left to fend for themselves in squalid and precarious conditions (Tantua, 2009). The negative impacts of the oil industry, coupled with the lack of distribution of oil wealth, have nurtured hostility and distrust among local communities and led to the establishment of new movements, including militia ones, seeking changes in the way oil extraction is governed. Social movements, such as the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) in 1966/67, the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1992/93, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in 2003/2004, and most recently, the Niger Delta Avengers in 2015/16, have all been established to secure local recognition over resources, and strengthen indigenous entitlement claims. These movements position themselves as leaders of struggle against injustice, and mobilise around an ideology of 'self-determination and local resource control'.

In terms of the Niger Delta, we adopt a broad understating of conflict that embraces the unequal distribution of resources and power, competition for money, power and status, and a situation in which societal values reflect the interests of a few rather than the interests of all (Matthewman et al., 2007, Vold et al., 2002, Buechler, 2000). In particular, resource endowed environments like the Niger Delta are arenas for contested entitlements, frustration and competition (Tilly, 2003, Collier and Hoeffler, 2004, Weinstein, 2009), in which protest or insurgencies emerge and have a significant impact upon eventual political outcomes (Ross, 2008). In this context, conflict can be violent or non-violent. Non-violent conflict refers to forms of civil disobedience by individuals or groups (Vinthagen, 2006), while violent conflicts indicate destructive forms of action which usually involve the use of arms (Jacoby, 2008). Although violent conflicts often occur between ethnic groups (Brown and Langer, 2012), it does not necessarily follow that all ethnic groups fight against each other (Stewart, 2008), as ethnically diverse societies can also cohabit peacefully with each other. Furthermore, violent conflict can be directed against the state (Mason and Fett, 1996), as rebel groups fight either to replace an existing government or to create a new nation state. This reminds us that conflict is inherently context dependent (i.e. reflecting underlying political and economic conditions), as well as path dependent (i.e. reflecting historical composition and trajectory) (Turton 1997, Fearon and Laitin 1996). Likewise, violent actions labelled as 'militant acts' are mostly mobilised around collective identity (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004), as this propels people to fight, kill and if necessary sacrifice their one lives.

'Militia groups' operating in the Niger Delta region can be seen as collective and organised efforts by a group of people who feel alienated and oppressed, and who seek to effect or resist change by acting within and outside the laws of the state. They represent groups with common histories, shared geographies, similar life experiences and similar aspirations (Ruggiero and Montagna, 2008). Militia groups, however, also nurture feelings of belonging, shared beliefs, values and meanings, and mobilise action (Crossley, 2002). This article focuses on this capacity of militia groups. It examines the ways militias create room for manoeuvre to facilitate collective action, strengthen claims making, and secure greater legitimacy and recognition.

The Niger Delta has witnessed a prolonged history of conflict over oil resources, and this has intensified from the late 1990s onwards. As the conflict intensified, it has become more violent and the number of casualties has risen significantly. At the same time, the conflict has had a significant impact on Nigeria's oil infrastructure, directly resulting in global economic consequences. It has also spawned an illicit but potentially lucrative industry in oil theft, home-grown refining, kidnapping and piracy. The emergence of armed groups further complicated the already contentious and volatile relationships between the main stakeholders involved in the governance of oil resources in the region. Thus, the 'oil

complex' (Watts, 2004) now also includes a large number of militias and their commanders, as well as disparate elements of the Nigerian military. These relatively new actors have radically altered the political dynamics of the Niger Delta in recent years. Their actions have also impacted upon livelihood strategies locally. All resource conflicts provide incentives to wealth accumulation, which in the context of the Niger Delta, facilitates a wider distribution of favours and benefits through patronage networks. By their nature, these networks exacerbate inequalities on the one hand, but also offer ways for local communities to survive (Gore and Pratten, 2003, Osaghae et al., 2007). As Boas (2012), rightly states, we may associate militancy with greed, but that greed is anchored in a desire to address social injustice and create a livelihood pathway.

This article explores the complex voices of militants associated with the capture of oil resources in the Niger Delta region. In doing so, the analysis contributes to a rich body of discussion and debate on oil and development in sub-Saharan Africa that has been aired in the *Extractives Industry and Society* in recent years. Previous articles in this journal have covered a wide range of themes on oil governance and transparency (Hoinathy and Janszky, 2017; Olanya, 2015; Ogwang et. al., 2018; Melyoki, 2017); Ovadia, 2014, livelihoods (Adusah-Karikari, 2015; Siakwah, 2017; Enns and Bersaglio, 2016; Obeng-Odoom, 2014), environmental degradation (Fentiman and Zabbey, 2015), participation and civil society contestation (Ablo, 2015; Symons, 2016), and politics and nation building (Pedersen and Bazilian, 2014; Holterman, 2014; Weldegiorgis et al., 2017). In the context of the Niger Delta, several articles have contributed to debates concerning struggles around oil and the mobilization of militants (Iwilade, 2017; Isumonah, 2015; Pegg, 2015; Demirel-Pegg and Pegg, 2015; Obi, 2014). However, none of these papers have explored the experiences of militants 'from within', or how the voices and agency of militants shape collective identity. Providing a rare vantage point from the militants themselves, this paper seeks to address this gap in the literature.

The analysis is informed by recent field-based research carried out between July 31st, 2010 and January 31st, 2011, in seven different study site locations across the Delta. These locations included: Port Harcourt Town, Diobu and Abuloma in Rivers State, Yenagoa and selected communities within South Ijaw local government areas of Bayelsa State, and Obubura in Cross Rivers State. Adopting a purposive sampling framework, a total of 35 semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants, including activists, militias, youth leaders and civil society members, whose ages ranged from 24-72yrs. Given the sensitivity and security concerns of this study, it was challenging to establish contact with the top hierarchy of militias known as '*Generals*,' as they preferred to remain hard to reach. However, within the middle and bottom rung of the hierarchy, it was easier to make contact, build trust and establish relationships. Data were also generated by way of informal conversations and observations at

newspaper stands, nightclubs/bars and eateries, where trust and interpersonal relationships could be established.

2. The Emergence of Militancy: Charismatic Leadership and Collective Identity

A significant feature linked to current militia action in the Niger Delta region is the influence of charismatic leadership. The fear of domination and political oppression spurred the emergence of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), a movement initiated by a former school teacher and an undergraduate of chemistry, named Adaka Boro in 1966. The NDVF claimed to be a movement speaking on behalf of local communities excluded from decisions on the exploitation of oil and the distribution of subsequent benefits. As such, it adopted a strategy that included violent action and threats of secession in order to advance entitlement claims and demands of local inhabitants of the Niger Delta region. Importantly, the NDVF is perceived by many ethnic Ijaws (the NDVF is the first armed militia of only Ijaw extraction) as a symbol of unity and identity, a cause worth fighting and dying for. This gives contemporary militia forces a powerful mechanism and platform to mobilise people and trigger collective action. This also locates the current context of conflict in an important historical setting, specifically, a history of armed campaign for greater autonomy, resource control and self determination. The actions of Isaac Adaka Boro, founder of the NDVF, live vividly in the imagination of contemporary militia, and are called upon to rally support for the struggle against perceived injustices and oppression.

In many ways, Boro's call for arms is a powerful motivational framework (Gamson, 1995) for contemporary militia. Current struggles are recast and aligned to Boro's struggles. His language gives life to collective action, and unifies individuals. When carrying out fieldwork and when asking militia about the motivations that led to their involvement in the struggle, it was striking the number of times respondents referred to Boro. The following text from the Twelve Day Revolution and attributed to Boro was often cited:

Ijaws are seen as victims of a woolly administration. Year after year, we are clinched in tyrannical chains and led through a dark ally of perpetual political and social deprivation [...] the day will come for us to fight for our long-denied right to self-determination.

Boro's statements often used metaphors to describe the oppression suffered by Ijaws and to justify militia action. He was quick to convert accusations of robbery, banditry and terrorism into justification for collective action and claims making. The fight over oil was a fight for freedom:

Today is a great day, not only in our lives, but also in the history of the Niger Delta. Perhaps, it will be the greatest day for a very long time.... We are going to demonstrate to the world, what and how we feel about oppression. Before today, we were branded

robbers, bandits, terrorists, or gangsters, but after today, we shall be heroes of our land....Remember your seventy-year-old grandmother who still farms before she eats, remember also your poverty-stricken people, remember too your petroleum which is being pumped out daily from your veins and then fight for your freedom (Adaka Boro, 1966: 116).

These views were also evident in an interview with Onaru⁴, a former militia member of the NDVF, now in his mid-seventies. His comments show the dynamic that links feeling exploited with a decision to collectively mobilise in order to change the terms on which the benefits of oil are distributed:

... We felt short-changed, in the scheme of things. I mean we had oil being exploited to benefit other parts of the country; whilst our own area remained underdeveloped and backward.... Realising that the resources are from our area, we felt the solution was armed struggle. (Interview, Kaiama, Bayelsa State, 28 July, 2010)

The perception of deprivation evident in the statements of Boro and Onaru is the platform for contentious politics in the Niger Delta region. It triggers a sense of collective identity, a common purpose, and an aspiration for 'self-determination and resource control'. Crucially, the aspiration overturns the deprivation and oppression. In another interview with Timidi, an unemployed active militia in his thirties, we see how the discourse of emancipation is deeply rooted in the ideological call to arms of leaders such as Adaka Boro and Ken Saro Wiwa:

We have been fighting for the cause of the Niger Delta for years. People like Isaac Adaka Boro came on board, he died, and Ken Saro Wiwa came....You know we are the people that are feeding the whole country, but if you come to my community, there is no electricity, no roads, no drinking water, nothing, and nothing. (Interview, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, 14 September, 2010)

Similar views were also expressed by another active militia, Akpainfoko, a school dropout and in his early thirties, who highlighted how unemployment was a significant factor pushing vulnerable youth to join the militia groups. The sense of deprivation and frustration, and the impact of poverty and deprivation leave their indelible mark on a disaffected population.

Our youth lack employment and jobs. We have oil in our community, but others enjoy the benefits.... In the Niger Delta struggle, we have the oil, and we cannot taste it. (Interview, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, 14 September, 2010)

⁴ The only member of the NDVF still alive at the time of this writing.

The sense of deprivation and injustice were also apparent in narratives of non-militants. For instance, Kponi, an academic researcher in his late sixties, questioned the structural relationship of power which eventually led to a conscious awakening amongst people of the Niger Delta region. According to Kponi:

When people become conscious of injustice, which in this case is a question of the relationship between people in the Niger Delta and those exploiting and benefitting from oil resources, they react and revolt...as an expression of disgust about what is happening...people becoming disillusioned by the system. (Interview, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 5 August, 2010)

These responses reflect a set of beliefs and sentiments within socially constructed meanings of everyday life. It draws our attention to how human interactions at a micro level intersect with macro political structures, in which the actions of individuals or groups coalesce. More so, they offer insights into how conflict can emerge from the specific structure or history of a given society (Touraine, 1985). Identities, rooted in everyday experiences and shared constructions of community, imagined or otherwise (Polletta and Jasper, 2001), are the catalyst for collective action.

In sum, the narratives in this section draw our attention to Benford and Snow's (2000) idea of frame articulation and amplification, which involves linking events and experiences in compelling ways that highlight the relative significance of specific events or beliefs. It reflects how individuals and groups fit into or respond to institutional structures and power relationships in the Niger Delta region. It also reinforces the argument that violence is a site-specific phenomenon anchored in specific historical processes and events, and linked to wider social interactions of material transformation and power relations (Homer-Dixon, 1994; Tilly, 2003).

3. Political repression: The role of the State

Another factor that contributes to the emergence of militancy in the Niger Delta region is the role of the Nigerian state in response to protest and agitation. The militarisation of the protection of oil facilities and installations has served to intensify local tensions, and magnify the struggle for power and legitimacy over resource rights and recognition. The long years of successive military rule in Nigeria (1966–99) appear to have influenced the way violence and collective action have evolved in the Niger Delta (Tilly et al., 2001). There have been many well documented cases of state brutality in response to protest and agitation. One of the most famous is the 'Ogoni uprising', understood by many of the respondents we interviewed as a historical catalytic moment in the move to take up arms in the struggle over oil. These events were noted by Kponi, an academic researcher, who considered the political constraints faced by the NDVF in 1966, and the Ogoni uprising by the Movement for Survival of Ogoni

People (MOSOP) in 1995, pointing out the response by the military to agitation from these movements. According to Kponi:

Adaka Boro was unprepared to engage in the kind of struggle that he embarked on. You cannot just secede from a monster like Nigeria.... Ken Saro Wiwa was more of an intellectual trying to put agitation into a struggle, but then Ken was dealing with a monstrous structure, the Nigerian military, that did not understand the finesse of a revolutionary struggle. (Interview, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 5 August, 2010)

The narrative by Kponi suggests that the openness or closure of regimes shapes the success or failure of movements. Thus the NDVF's attempt to secede under an authoritarian regime was never going to be successful because it had few resources. On the other hand, Ken Saro Wiwa had more resources and could claim to represent the common interest of Ogonis against the activities of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). According to Kponi, the MOSOP began its confrontation with claims and demands of compensation for the degradation and pollution caused in Ogoni land from oil exploration activities, demands which eventually led to the prosecution and death of Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other members of the MOSOP, by hanging, on 10 November 1995. Similarly, Kowa a non-militant, academic researcher, recalls how the non-violent approach adopted by Ken Saro Wiwa, eventually fuelled the need for armed confrontation because the regime was not open to peaceful dialogue and advocacy:

The only language the oppressors understood was the language of AK-47, because Ken Saro Wiwa never carried any AK-47. He was involved in a peaceful movement, calling the attention of the international community to the injustices going on in the Niger Delta....Apparently, the youths came to the conclusion that the only language Nigeria understood was that of AK-47. Let AK-47 talk to AK-47. This is what I suspect, but I have never had the opportunity of talking to these young men. (Interview, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 5 August, 2010)

Oweifa, an active militia, also argues that armed violence was the only option available to the protesters. He believed the events from the *Ogoni uprising* and the *Ogele procession* provoked a deep sense of uncertainty among the Ijaws, so much so that they had to communicate with and push into action their gods and deities. According to Oweifa:

... We had to consult with the ancestors of Ijaw land; our deities had to be reawakened. We had to ask them questions, regarding when to engage in war against the federal government and oil companies. (Interview, Southern Ijaw, Bayelsa State, 7 October 2010)

Non-violent protests from communities, such as taking over oil platforms, disrupting work at oil facilities sites, or sending letters of petition to oil companies through community delegates or representatives, yielded little or no positive outcome. Protests at targeted sites of oil facilities, usually manned by state

and private armies of the oil companies, resulted in arrests, detentions and in extreme cases, deaths. Instances of such cases of violence and death were noted in an interview with Otuan an active militia member:

Even at the community level, you will remember the case of the Ogboinbiri community that was burnt down by the soldiers several times ...people protesting were killed by the soldiers.... So we had reached a point that even if we embarked on peaceful protests, they would kill us. This was what actually triggered the desire for us to take up arms to defend ourselves. (Interview, Southern Ijaw, Baylesa State, 10 October 2010)

At the same time, Otuan provides a contrasting view to that of Adaka Boro about self-determination. While previous struggles focused on secession, contemporary struggles focus on the denial of the Ijaws right of ownership to their '*God given wealth*'. According to Otuan, the Land Use Act of 1978 and the Petroleum Act of 1969 are 'obnoxious', as they strengthen state power and authority and further deny the rights of minorities to participation, recognition and access to oil wealth:

...How can we repeal some of the obnoxious laws, like the Land Use Decree, the Petroleum Act of 1968–69 and Decree 13 of 1996? These are some of the decrees that make us slaves in our community. Decree 13 says that 100 meters surrounding every river bank belongs to federal government. So many of our communities reside in areas that belong to the federal government. Oil companies can come and carry out explorations, while the federal government sits, wherever they want to sit, at Lagos or Abuja, and decide to allot our communities into oil blocks and sell them to somebody. And that person could come, anytime, and everything in that community belongs to him, including the community. So we felt that is not right. It is not applied in other parts of the country. (Interview, Southern Ijaw, Baylesa State, 10 October 2010)

Similar comments were also expressed by Kowa, who narrates the history of resource laws prior to the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region. He argues that the Mineral Ordinance Act of 1914, established by the British Colony and amended in 1925 and 1946, set the legal framework for political power and authority over resource governance in Nigeria. The Act conferred powers on colonial administrators to grant resource rights without the participation and recognition of affected people or communities. It stipulated that all mineral resources upon land, rivers, streams or water are vested with the Crown. The resource governance law was passed on to successive military and democratic regimes, and became part of Nigeria's constitution. As Kowa puts it:

Derivation was the central key of the pre-independence constitution...The principle became increasingly silenced so people started protesting that at the beginning we had agreed, different nationalities of different regions should control their own resources. Now that we have found oil in the Niger Delta, the federal government has suddenly

jettisoned that fundamental agreement, in order to take over oil resources throughout the land using decrees. (Interview, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 10 August, 2010)

4. Militancy: Criminals or Fighters for Self-determination and Resource Control?

From the preceding sections, it is clear that, on one level, militancy in the Niger Delta is rooted to historical struggles led by people like Adaka Boro and Ken Saro Wiwa. One of the accusations constantly raised against militants is whether or not they are participating in criminal activities. While governments and multinational interests are quick to condemn militant action as criminal, among local residents in the Niger Delta, opinions are divided. This is especially the case when we look at the views of militant and non-militants. Kponi, a non-militant in his late sixties, points out that contemporary militia action in the Niger Delta, is simply a means of survival for many who lack any real livelihood:

Everybody in the Niger Delta knows who or what militancy is all about, that these are groups of young boys and girls who have taken to arms as a way of making demands, whether these demands are genuine or not...those demands could be made from a central brain somewhere articulating the issues, and he manages to get a group of people convinced of his view. And many of them are people who see it as a way of survival, depending on how they understand the issues involved. (Interview, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 5 August, 2010)

Kponi's comments take us beyond seeing militancy simply as a survival mechanism. He also underlines the role played by leaders in mobilising followers and holding out visions of a more secure or better future. In further comments, he attempts to distinguish contemporary militancy from previous struggles, and in the process highlights the need for leaders to articulate their visions into actions

...I would say that what is going on is essentially a kind of primitive accumulation. Adaka Boro did much better than what these militants have done. The only mistake Adaka Boro made was that he was unprepared to engage in the kind of struggle that we have embarked upon...Adaka Boro was the man who really articulated something that could have been forged into a neat ideology for the emancipation of the Niger Delta. (Interview, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 5 August, 2010)

Alaere, a key informant and an activist in the Niger Delta region, frames the meaning of militancy in the context of wider state–society relations. This context, she argues, nurtures both militia and criminal actions and the distinction between the two is not always clear cut:

...It is difficult to draw a line saying this group of militants are criminals and that other group are part of the struggle. They are fused. The criminals hide under a disguise made possible by President Obasanjo, who took both criminals and the actual militia and baptised them all as militants....President Obasanjo before called certain groups common

criminals, and now he wants to talk with them. (Interview, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 8 August, 2010).

So how do active militias perceive their actions? Otuogidi is in his mid -thirties, and has been a militant for many years. When he talks of his militia actions, he makes few references to ideology or values, such as freedom and autonomy. Instead, he focuses on the link between ‘freedom fighting’ and more material or pragmatic concerns such the lack of jobs, and the lack of participation and access to resource benefits:

In the beginning of the struggle...our youth lacked employment and jobs. We have oil in our community, but others enjoy the benefits. That is the struggle. When you hear about the struggle in the Niger Delta struggle, it is all about the oil and who enjoys its benefits. (Interview, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, 14 September, 2010)

Ololo, another recently active militant, offers a more detailed description of how the term militancy has evolved, making a distinction between ‘freedom fighting’ and ‘militancy’:

The militant name came recently. We have been fighting for the cause of the Niger Delta for years ...so we now change the name to militancy. We are fighting with the government so that it knows about the Niger Delta situation....We cannot go to Abuja to fight them, so we have to destroy pipelines and embark on illegal bunkering business. From that point onwards, the federal government became involved and we started shooting them. (Interview, Southern Ijaw, Bayelsa State, 18 October, 2010)

5. Militant Political Tactics and ‘The looseness of things’

In the previous section we have discussed the ideological positions that underpin militia activity, as well as the more pragmatic concerns that lead some to become militants. One of the key areas where the more pragmatic considerations come to the fore is the relation between militia and political elite, especially those seeking electoral victories in the Niger Delta. Elections in Nigeria are marred by outbursts of violence, reflecting their significance as opportunities to access wealth, status and other forms of security. In the Niger Delta, election votes can be collected in exchange for guns, money, and opportunities to access oil resources. Through the exchanges, militia leaders and political elites negotiate different informal settlements around oil access and distribution. The exchanges are rarely based on ideology – or at least not for any significant period of time. Instead, they are an integral part of an informal, sometimes clandestine, patronage exchange which by definition is fluid, and based on short-term interest and gratification. The fluidity of the relations is captured nicely in Kponi’s (a non-militant) account:

In terms of the militants and politicians, there was some kind of coalition at the time, or a kind of togetherness. Having acquired militant spirits...some politicians saw the youth as veritable tools to achieve political ambition, and they started paying and using them.

Some politicians even ended up using militants to become governors....However, the militant group that was used to achieve this political objective eventually found itself alone, out of favour, and it started attacking the state through the destruction of pipelines and all forms of criminality. The group had to find ways to survive(Interview, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 5 August, 2010)

Agregha, a community chief, described the role of a militia leader in the 2007 governorship elections, noting how the elections were fraught with violence and involved the intimidation of citizens and the denial of their rights to exercise their democratic right to vote. In his view, politicians will do all it takes to win elections, and the implication of his description is that militia leaders will also do whatever it takes to ensure victory:

In the rerun elections...the situation was ugly in southern Ijaw communities. One of the militant leaders ordered that all the election materials be brought to his community, even those belonging to other communities. And all the thumb printing⁵ was done in that guy's place, under his command. We were not even allowed to vote...(Interview, Southern Ijaw, Bayelsa State, 18 October, 2010)

With guns and money often received from political elites in exchange for other favours such as electoral support, militant leaders are in a strong position to venture into new spaces of power and governance. They establish territorial authority and compete with local chiefs and traditional leaders. According to Kponi:

...militants found out they could do quite a number of things without the help of politicians, so they set up their own kingdoms, what they call militant camps. Whoever is within that enclave comes under their authority. They even intimidate traditional rulers and end up controlling them or pushing them aside by making them inconsequential, ineffective or ineffectual—the chiefs cannot do anything. So militants do whatever they want. And wherever they are, they intimidate everyone so much that you can't complain or report them. The best you can do is be part of what is going on. (Interview, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 5 August, 2010)

Militants have thus become a key part of local political settlements. As Pato explained:

We felt we were held hostage by both the Joint Military Task Force of the Nigerian army and the Ijaw militant groups in our communities. If somebody wants to do anything in the community, you must first ask permission of the militants or militant leaders. So we saw they were eroding the traditional institutional system of the Ijaw. (Interview, Southern Ijaw, Bayelsa State, 18 October, 2010)

⁵ Using fingers and palm-kernel shells as casted votes.

Another respondent, Otuan, compared the Oporoza-led militia actions in the Delta State and what is happening in the Bayelsa State:

Our host communities are now slaves to the militant leaders, just as the JTF (Joint Task force) also enslaved us. They were not making any attempt to drive away the JTF. However, in the Delta State, Oporoza drove away all the JTF and closed all the flow stations. Here...you must continue to raise your hand for the JTF to allow you to go anywhere. So we now start to ask ourselves, what kind of struggle is this? If you are actually there to liberate the people, you are not supposed to hold the communities hostage as well as allowing the JTF to operate freely. (Interview, Southern Ijaw, Bayelsa State, 10 October, 2010)

In 1966, the number of militia under Adaka Boro was about 150 men. By 2009, the number had risen to at least 26,000. The growth in numbers reflects the growth in opportunities. Over time, militia leaders have become key power holders and important stakeholders in the way political settlements evolve locally. Their rise to prominence therefore is anchored in their roles as militants confronting state power and multinational interests over oil access and use. However as we have seen in this section, their power also rests on their success in carving out positions for themselves as political leaders and brokers.

6. Conclusion

This article situates the emergence of militancy within a number of key historical and political processes in Nigeria, and specifically in the Niger Delta region. Militia activity represents a classic case of contentious politics (Tilly, 2003) involving the Nigerian state that wields political power, and militants who claim to speak on behalf of a constituency that lacks formal representation. The aim of this contentious politics is to change the structure of resource governance. As the empirical material clearly shows, motivations to become a militant vary and participation in militancy also changes the personal identity of the individuals involved, as it offers a sense of fulfilment (Gamson, 1992).

There are reasons that underpin the phenomenal rise in militancy in the Niger Delta. First, locals experienced a level of political domination that created tension and grievance. This is evident in early claims for regional autonomy, self-determination and autonomy. A second significant factor to be considered is charismatic leadership. The emergence of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), led by Adaka Boro in 1966, provided a united platform and inclusive discourse for both militants and non-militants in the Niger Delta. Importantly, he made explicit links between a lack of access to, and ownership over, a rich resource endowment and structural conditions of injustice, poverty and frustration. A third feature associated with the emergence of militancy in the Niger Delta is the role of the state. The continued militarisation of the region heightened tensions and opened the way for violent

conflict. The Niger Delta became an arena of contested entitlements (Nauman, 1996), a theatre of struggles where the state turned to violence and coercion to enforce its own position in the region. Finally, the rise of militancy is also related to the enforcement of legislative laws of resource extraction as a key part of oil governance. These laws are perceived by militants as strengthening state power and authority, and discriminating against local residents.

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